A Thousand Miles in a Canoe.

By DEAN PERCEVAL.

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A

THOUSAND MILES IN A CANOE.

OR A

CANOE VOYAGE

FROM

DENVER, COLORADO, TO LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS.

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1867.

A PERSONAL ADVENTURE BY DEAN PERCEVAL.

BUSHNELL, ILLINOIS:
1880.

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TO HIS COMPANIONS

ON THIS MEMORABLE VOYAGE WHO DULY APPRECIATED THE
WRITER'S FRANTIC ENDEAVORS TO KEEP DANGER
AT A RESPECTABLE DISTANCE, THIS
LITTLE VOLUME IS

AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

BY THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

THE writer desires to say, to those who care to know, that this little book is a truthful sketch of a western adventure, consisting of a canoe voyage from Denver, Colorado, to Leavenworth, Kansas, over the Platte and Missouri Rivers, during the Summer of 1867, and at a time when traveling on the plains was rendered very dangerous on account of the warlike attitude of the Indians. In truth, overland travel had almost ceased because of barbarian depredations. But a quarto of youthful adventurers,—who did not go west after health, who failed to get rich in the Colorado mines, and who wanted to give the rising generation a chance,—adopted this plan to get east. And it worked like a—but this is anticipating.

Whatever this sketch may lack in romantic idealism, or dime novelism, it is hoped will be filled in by the imaginative reader (according to taste), whose creative fancy, it is surmised, will be begging to be loosed. Give it rope, there is plenty of room.

This book was not projected in a moment of reckless enthusiasm, but it is the result of a deliberate, cold-blooded purpose that gained strength with years, consequently the writer has no apology to make for its appearance. He is not the least bit sorry. (The critics are yet to hear from). And he hopes the reader will not be sorry either. Until after he has bought the book.

DEAN PERCEVAL.

CHAPTER I.

IN the Spring of 1867, the Indians of Colorado took to the "warpath" with unusual zeal. The fiendish work began in April, and before the close of May, they had possession of nearly all the stage stations between Denver and Fort Kearney. The route to Salt Lake was terribly harrassed, as were also the routes leading to the Southwest. A large band of Sioux surrounded an emigrant train within forty miles of Denver, on the "cut-off," and had it not been for the timely arrival of several armed citizens from the city, these poor people would undoubtedly have met with a shocking death. These enraged barbarians approached within a few miles of the metropolis on several occasions, and a combined attack on all the settlements was seriously apprehended. So general and wide-spread was the alarm that the territorial govern-

ment made a call for three thousand militia, for a term of three months' service, just to give these gentlemen a lesson in Yankee etiquette, as it were.

This aggressive step on the part of the belligerent Sioux, placed a temporary embargo on the freighting and staging business. Stages arrived and departed quite regularly under a strong guard of United States soldiers, but there were so many shocking stories concerning depredations on the plains, that very few persons were courageous enough to attempt an overland trip under the circumstances, and travel almost ceased. Thus, for several weeks, Denver was almost isolated from the business and social world, having free intercourse only with the various mining camps from forty to one hundred and fifty miles distant in the mountains.

This state of affairs soon had a very marked effect on business in this hitherto prosperous city. Every enterprise received a severe shock. Laboring men were discharged by the score, and thus swelled the already large army of idlers. As the receipt of eastern supplies fell off, designing Shylocks sprung the market on staples, thereby shaping the misfortunes of others to tickle to their

own cupidity. From ten dollars board suddenly advanced to twelve, and then fifteen, per week, and so on. Men who could not get employment, and who were too honest to steal, pawned whatever they possessed—blankets, and even a part of their clothing—to obtain something to satisfy hunger. Even then, many of us were compelled to do upon one meal a day, and sleep on the streets at night.

In prosperous times there were several free lunch-rooms in Denver, kept by liquor dealers usually. This meant that a man could eat five cents' worth of cheese, sweitzer-case, or what not, and pay twenty-five cents a glass—a very shallow one—for two and a half cents' worth of very indifferent whiskey. But during the panic patrons, old and new, soon acquired the habit of "eating without drinking," on physiological principles no doubt, and the free lunch business was temporarily suspended.

When the proclamation was issued for troops to put down the Indian uprising, an army of dependents at Denver responded with alacrity; any one of them being in fit condition to eat a Sioux without pepper or salt. A large number of these

fellows had participated in the "late onpleasantness," and were greedy for another "breakfast job," so to speak. There was one serious obstacle, however. About two-thirds of them wanted to conduct the campaign. There was not a shadow of a doubt that there was a score or more of Napoleons and Wellingtons among the volunteers; but the Governor's military perceptions were so obtuse that he could not even give us an opportunity to demonstrate our convictions, and stubbornly persisted in having his own views carried out, right in the face of this grand array of military talent.

The volunteers encamped on the fair grounds, where two weeks were spent devouring public bread and beef, and wrangling over the offices. When the day arrived on which we expected to organize ourselves into a fighting militia, the fact leaked out that there was not enough funds in the treasury to arm and equip us; consequently we disbanded, and the General Government was left to take care of the treacherous Sioux. For the brief time served we were paid in territorial scrip, which brought only seventy cents on the dollar. And Colorado has been sorely afflicted with potato

bugs and grasshoppers nearly every year since. Swift retribution!

While in camp I became acquainted with one Charles Smith. I had heard of this family before, and took him right into my confidence. Charley was a pleasant fellow, and when it became evident that we were to be discharged, we "put our heads together" to devise some plan to get either east or west. The latter was preferable, but owing to the Indian war, it was not practicable at that time. The route east was also temporarily closed, but, as the jovial Charles suggested, we could float down the Platte on a board. Now this was made in jest, but after a little reflection we decided to adopt the principle, if not the board. This course being permanently decided upon, carpenters were selected to build a boat twenty feet in length with five feet beam. While the craft was building, the proposed voyage became known all over the city, and Smith and myself earned a little cheap notoriety in consequence.

It now appeared that a few such voyages had been attempted, but none had ever been successful, and several wiseacres took a fiendish delight in shaking their philosophical heads and consigning

us to watery graves. With the Indians on one hand, and Platte quicksands on the other, I confess that the proposed expedition had many terrors for me, though not sufficient to induce me to give it over. As neither of us was accustomed to manning boats, we engaged to carry to Plattsmouth a queensware clerk for his services as pilot, and another young man (first cabin passage), for a certain sum. We had numerous other applications for passage, but the carrying capacity of our boat was not quite as elastic as that of a hotel hack, and we had to refuse them.

Among the large number who applied for passage, were four young men who had come from Massachusetts together. They reached Colorado with some money, but like the Prodigal, they had wasted it in riotous living, and were ashamed to write home for assistance. We regretted exceedingly to refuse them. The day before we started Bacon, the tenor of the party, notified us that they had secured a boat, provisioned it, and would await us at Deer Island, some fifty or sixty miles below.

Our boat, to which we gave the romantic name of "Western Rover," being completed, we had it

delivered on the banks of the Platte, about a half mile below the city. Here we "pitched it within and without," as did Noah the Ark, and launched it. In the afternoon our provisions and munitions of war were brought thither and loaded for shipment; the former consisted of canned vegetables, canned meats, flour, some soft bread, and eight bottles of cherry brandy (for medicinal purposes); and the latter of three navy revolvers, a Sharpe's carbine, sixteen shooter, and two army muskets, which had the appearance of condemned ordnance. We soon found, however, that these muskets could throw balls at a lively rate, and were very dangerous at both ends. The bare announcement, by one of the Denver dailies, on the nineteenth, that "a novel expedition would sail at four o'clock on the afternoon of the twentieth," brought an immense throng to see us off. By half-past three the shores and knolls about us were covered with eager spectators. The simple thought that the public appreciated our daring, filled us with pride, and, for the time being, we forgot the perils before us.

At precisely four o'clock, June 20th, 1867, we pushed away from the shore and out into the rapid

current, amid a grand flourish of handkerchiefs and a chorus of "Good-bye!" "Good luck to you!" "Look out for your top-knots!" etc., etc. Seeking the highest points of observation, the excited crowd watched us until we were swept by the point of an island, and out of sight. Seated between the oar-locks, with my back toward the bow, I watched their eager movements with a thrill of pleasure, alternating with that of pride and hope!

We had not been on the river twenty minutes until we realized that it was indeed a perilous voyage. On account of an exceedingly heavy snow storm that fell the first part of June, the Platte was very high, and the current carried us at the alarming speed of about ten miles an hour. But what filled us with terror was the fact that the river was dotted here and there with ghastly snags, peering out at us through the foam of the surging waters. These we found very difficult to avoid in the rapid whirl of the tortuous channel. Striking one of these grim obstacles, at that rate of speed, would have been certain shipwreck, as our boat was built entirely of pine and could have been easily shivered. About fifteen miles below Denver, however, the craft was caught "on a

center" by the point of a snag some distance under the surface, and began revolving like a gunboat in action, only a great deal faster. This sudden change came near capsizing us, but as soon as our pilot could collect his senses, and restore an equilibrium, he seized an oar and pushed her off. At this point the water was only about five feet deep.

Sometime before sundown that evening, we saw an emigrant encampment to the right. As we had found the perils of the Platte far beyond our expectations, we deemed it best to join these travelers for the night, as a mutual protection against Indians.

Eight o'clock the next morning found us moving onward toward Deer Island, which we soon reached. Here, for the space of about two miles, the water seemed to have a greater fall, and a far more rapid current, than at Denver. Having heard so many stories regarding the dangers at this place, which had wrecked all former expeditions of a similar nature, we naturally approached the spot with a feeling of awe, mingled with the gravest doubts. Every man remained at his post with that determination of purpose that is reached

only under the most desperate circumstances. As we entered the channel the angry waves seized our little craft and sent it forward at a greatly increased rate of speed, as if they would dash it to pieces. This increased our alarm, but not a word was spoken, as the foaming, surging waters carried us onward, except an occasional command from the bow. With Jackson at the rudder, Matthews at the "lookout," and Smith and myself alternating at the oars, we held the Rover to the channel and dodged the snags with great precision. Thus, by dint of the most persevering efforts, we steered clear of all dangers, though nearly exhausted, and glided out upon the comparatively calm waters of the Platte beyond. About three years previous, two disheartened miners, while attempting the voyage between Denver and the Missouri, had been wrecked at this point; the body of one being washed ashore just below the island, where it was found by some herders. Portions of the canoe were also found later, but further down the stream.

Before reaching, and just after passing, Deer Island, we looked in vain for the Massachusetts "boys," who had promised to meet us here. As it was all we could do to avoid shipwreck in daylight,

we thought it incredible that these fellows could escape the dangers, even above Deer Island, on a moonless, starless night like that of the nineteenth; therefore we gave them up as lost.

We now found ourselves out upon an almost boundless desert, beyond the reach of human aid, with a limited supply of provisions, and at the mercy of the waves and the treacherous Sioux. These weighty and momentous considerations now impressed us deeply, and placed each on the alert; but all were hopeful and believed that the enterprise would be successful. As to the preparations for defense, we were well to do, having forty shots ready for the first volley. We had almost unlimited confidence in our ordnance.

Late that afternoon we passed, on the north shore, what we supposed to be a government supply train, but as it showed no inclination to halt, we could not avail ourselves of its protection that night. So we glided along with the current, which was becoming more tranquil all the time. At dusk we tied up to the north shore, where we encamped for the night. Fearing Indians might be prowling around in that vicinity, we deemed it best not to build a fire, although the cold mountain air chilled

us thoroughly. After a "cold" supper, and a few hearty draughts of brandy (strictly for medicinal purposes), three of our number sank to rest on a bed of blankets, on the edge of the shore, the fourth man keeping watch. The one on guard advanced a few steps from the beds, where he lay on his face, his eyes scanning the surface of the ground, and the dim, cheerless outline of the low, sandy bluffs stretching away to the north.

With the first gray streak of dawn on the following morning we again pushed out into the Platte for another day's adventure. About seven o'clock we landed for breakfast, which was rather a brief affair with us. We had a liquid paste preparation of sugar, milk, and coffee combined in the right proportions, put up in tin cans. A teaspoonful of this, mixed with river water, made rather an indifferent drink, and, as we subsisted almost entirely on canned provisions already cooked, a fire was never necessary, unless we desired to give way to a western failing for "pancakes," or "suthin' hot."

As the Rover rounded a point of land, near ten o'clock that forenoon, we observed a ranch about three miles below on the south side. A little later

we saw a human form pass from the sod house down to the river and back, a distance of about one hundred yards. As our stock of brandy was already low, it was decided to land and get some ranch whisky, just to cut the quicksand from our throats. There being no trees or intervening objects, we kept our eyes riveted on the dark sod walls of the hut and its inclosures, while floating with the current, but saw no other sign of life than that mentioned above. When within about twenty feet of the landing, we got a glimpse of an object that chilled the blood in our veins. The head of a Sioux warrior peering out around the walls, to see what had become of us, was a sight of rather a thrilling nature at that juncture. The truth flashed upon us in a moment, and the Rover struck out for the north shore with a rapidity wonderful to behold, while twenty-five or thirty Indians rushed out from their ambuscade and watched us with childlike amazement. As we made a liberal display of the firearms, to our great surprise they offered no violence, but what would have been our fate had we landed would be only a matter of speculation. On this, as on many former occasions, curiosity defeated a well-laid scheme.

By the time we had reached a point out of their range they had all retired within. A few minutes later a two-horse carriage, containing one man, was seen coming round a point of bluff about half a mile east of the sod hut, the horses going in a brisk trot. Not being near enough to render him any aid, or even give him warning, apparently unconscious of danger, he kept eyeing our craft, while we in turn watched his movements with breathless interest. When almost opposite the ranch the Indians suddenly sprang out, and frightened his horses so they ran away. The last view we got of this race the carriage was going over a slight elevation beyond, at a breakneck speed, with a number of "red-shanks" pressing close in the rear. The latter, no doubt, had left their ponies in the hills, as they all appeared to be on foot. This affair was full of mystery to us, and we could account for it only on the supposition that the man in the carriage belonged to some freight or emigrant train, which he was endeavoring to overtake. At all events his courage was much greater than his judgment.

About three o'clock that afternoon we reached Fort Morgan, where we reported the morning's

adventure to the commandant. As the river's currents were much less rapid now, and the dangers of Platte travel thereby correspondingly decreased, we decided to travel by night, and thus avoid, as much as possible, the flattering attentions of the noble red men. The officer in charge furnished us with a bountiful supply of bread, and treated us so kindly that we found it expedient to remain until evening.

While enjoying the hospitalities of the Morganites, the air was suddenly rent with the boisterous shouts of the Massachusetts "boys," whom we had given up for dead. They were no sooner landed than there began a very vigorous handshaking, just as though we had not met for twenty years. It now turned out that we had passed and repassed each other three times, the other party running the gauntlet at Deer Island during daylight on the twenty-first. The reader may well know that the meeting was a very joyous one, as it added strength of numbers and relieved the voyage of many of its lonesome features. This event, however, proved fatal to all the cherry brandy on board.

CHAPTER II.

JUST as the sun was sinking below that vast expanse of water and prairie stretching away to the west and north of Fort Morgan, we launched forth for the night, freighted with the good wishes of numerous spectators. All the way from Deer Island the Platte had been gradually widening its shores, until its waters now spread over vast beds of quicksand, near two miles in width. At the Fort the channel was almost free of all obstructions, but a short distance below we found the river terribly cut up with islands, so much so that when the almost impenetrable snadows of night enveloped everything, we were involved in a maze of narrow, shallow channels of labyrinthian possibilities. Just as if the surroundings were not lonely and depressing enough, the air was made hideous with the low, monotonous wail of hundreds of beavers, with

which the shores and islands were lined. These guttural songs were enough to strike terror into the soul of an anchorite; and in the midst of it all we were occasionally compelled to get out and drag boats, that drew only seven inches of water, two or three hundred yards over sandbars. The romantic interest which had surrounded the voyage, like a halo, from its first inception, now began to wane.

At night our method of duty was substantially as follows: one sat in the stern and guided the rudder, while another remained in the bow with his eyes scanning the surface of the water, on the lookout for snags; and the other two slept in the center of the craft, or tried to, which is all the same in theory if not in practice. The watch was changed at midnight.

About ten o'clock of the first night the ruddy glow of a great campfire—it looked more like an immense bonfire over some political victory—was observed some distance inland on the north side. As freighters and emigrants invariably kept the south shore, the origin of this fire was very mysterious. We saw men as giants, in the glare of the flames; the scene having every appearance of

a "war-dance," or a barbarian ratification of fiendish deeds. Our curiosity was raised to a very high point, and we all felt like making a détour of the camp to ascertain what it meant. But this was simply impossible. Those on duty did not have time; others were too sleepy. In the after part of the night the moon arose and cheered us on our solitary way.

After breakfast, on the morning of the twenty-third, we "hugged" the left shore for some distance. About the middle of the forenoon we learned, to our great suprise, that we were being watched by a party of Indians occupying the bluffs some two miles to the north. Not more than three or four showed themselves at once; we being highly favored by a broad intervening plain. Well knowing that a bold front is a very effective weapon in Indian warfare, six of us "shouldered arms," backwoods style, and got out and marched about two miles along the river. This course was rendered all the more expedient from the fact that, only a short distance below, the channel narrowed very abruptly, and we greatly feared a blockade at that point. Here they could have gained complete control of the Platte, and forbidden our further

advance. By this movement we hoped to give the impression, however false, that they would have to wade through rivers of gore to get our scalps. To our great delight they took the hint, and abandoned that line of action.

At the narrow pass referred to, the river turned gracefully to the left; and right at the bend was a little board shanty, beside which stood a new Ball mowing machine. Some of the grass had been cut, dried, and shocked, but the work of harvesting was by no means complete. Inside the hut were found some dishes, cooking utensils, and other evidences of a recent civilization. Here some enterprising Yankee had located, with the view, evidently, of filling a hay contract, but found a sudden departure conducive to health and longevity. There were no traces of violence, or bloodshed, though there were plenty pointing to a very hasty retreat, and that within six or eight days at the outside.

At this point, which was not far above the Chicago ranch, we went into camp. Here those who failed to get sufficient rest the night before were permitted to sleep while others stood guard, and seven out of eight proceeded at once, without

preliminaries, to retire. Fuel being plenty, we prepared quite a savory dinner of pancakes, hot coffee, and canned turkey, with succotash for a side dish.

As we had good reasons for thinking that the Sioux were only waiting for darkness to cover an attack, we resumed the journey at four o'clock in the afternoon, but the wind being very strong from the northwest we were driven violently across the channel and against the right bank. Finding it impossible to make headway against such a gale, and seeing ourselves at the mercy of any roving band of Indians that might take advantage of the bluffs which pressed close to the river on the south, we drew the boats from the water, turned them upside down, placed the bows together, and thus formed a wedge-shaped breastwork where all could hide. When complete, we flattened out behind it, like so many bats, and with weapons in position, awaited a crisis — that failed to come. About sunset the wind sank to a gentle breeze, when we razed our rude fortifications and launched forth for the night.

Without one single event of interest to break the monotony, the night passed drearily until near

morning. Between two and three o'clock I was suddenly startled from sleep by a musket shot which broke upon the stillness and solitude with all the concussive force of an artillery salute. I was up in a trice, and saw by the moon's light that we were near the south shore; and just beneath the dark outline of a low range of abrupt looking bluffs, which approached to within a few yards of the river, I observed a small building, in the shadows of which could be seen a human form. Smith, who was at the helm, whispered that the shot proceeded from the vicinity of the hut, the ball having passed just over the bow of our boat and struck in the water a few feet to the left. Matthews seized a musket to return fire. At this juncture five or six men rushed out of the ranch, and as they passed into the light the moonbeams danced upon their weapons in a way that sent a thrill of terror through our party. It was now apparent that we had aroused a company of U. S. troops on guard at some stage station, and Matthews perceived it to be the better part of valor to lay down his ordnance. As we showed no disposition for battle, the guards watched us glide gracefully out of range. On reaching Julesburg

early next morning we found the commander already apprised of the adventure. He told us the guards mistook us for Indians, who frequently travel that way; and added further that it was well for us that we did not return fire. We believed him.

We remained in Julesburg until late that afternoon, and before taking our departure the officer in charge supplied us with the necessary provisions. As an expedition of this kind had never been seen there before, we were treated with considerable distinction, and were looked upon by all with curious eyes.

It now appeared that we had again reached "God's country," (using a common western expression), for just across the river was a railroad —a real, genuine railroad, the great Union Pacific, the connecting link of two civilizations,—with its "arms of iron and pulse of steel." Yes, right here, about two hundred and forty miles below Denver, and four hundred miles from the Missouri, or, in other words, in the midst of the Great American Desert, were to be seen the successful workings of one of the boldest and most gigantic enterprises of the age! From this on the voyage

did not seem half so dreary. Late that evening a heavy bank of cloud began to lift itself above the horizon in a way that indicated a severe storm. The muttering thunders were soon heard in the distance, the lightning irradiating the heavens with an electric touch.

> "Call you these peals of thunder but the yawn
> Of bellowing clouds? By Jove, they seem to me
> The world's last groans! and these vast sheets of flame
> Are its last blaze — the tapers of the Gods."

The storm was yet some distance off, but the prospect of taking a driving rain was by no means pleasing, however grand and sublime the elemental display. But there was no shelter to be found, and we glided along just as serenely as though there were two or three sections of mansard roofing at hand.

Sometime after dark, and while "heaven's artillery" was belching forth its dread threatenings, our curiosity was again seriously elevated by another immense bonfire over on the south side, some two or three miles back from the river. The scene was located on the large open plain in the vicinity of Beauvau's ranch, and if there was any difference, this was larger than the one witnessed

on the night of the twenty-second. The fire, aided by the lightning's glare, revealed a large company of men, one of our party with a microscopic eye surmising that he could see the "ponderous timbers" of the "ships of the desert" feeding the flames. But this man had a faculty of seeing more than anybody else in a given length of time. Be this as it may, we were certain that no company of emigrants or freighters could be induced to gather enough "buffalo chips" for such an exhaustive fire, —it is too much like work. Therefore we could come to no other conclusion than that it was a scene of plunder.

About midnight the storm overtook us, and after all the buncombe and display, it was a miserable failure—a flash in the pan, so to speak. It reminded us of a circus, the parade being the principal feature. But, thanks to Providence, the rain did not amount to a heavy dew. As though disappointed with the result, Nature ignited all the ammunition at once, and for the next hour we were completely enveloped in a flame of sheet lightning, that kept us as blind as an oyster. Fearing that the bright flashes which blinded us would betray us to our enemies, we landed on an island, to await the subsidence of the storm.

Our party was not profane to an alarming extent, but oh! shades of the sea serpent! we had barely landed when swearing began in several languages. It was mosquitos—"only this and nothing more." The very atmosphere vibrated with their wings and humming voices. The national air of this distinguished phlebotomist was rendered in Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe, with operatic variations, while his bill—and oh! such a bill!—was presented in advance. We tried to divert his attention by pointing to the beauty of the nocturnal display; but he had no taste for the sublime. Evidently he had studied philosophy in some modern institution, for his actions spoke plainly: "Business before pleasure." And he "went for" us "cheek by jowl."

During the next ten minutes business was exceedingly animated. As near as I can remember my own movements resembled those of a school boy with six erratic mice in the suburbs of his pants. A sudden desire to change locations seized each one simultaneously, but in the press of business no one could find time to untie the boats! The situation was becoming alarming; and finally, in sheer desperation, Smith took two turns in the

sand, and actually succeeded in unloosing the Rover before the miscreants got through the "surface dirt." No sooner had we reëmbarked, however, than he besought us to rub him down with a frying pan. In the excitement the boats became separated, and we did not meet again until morning. The Rover floated along the north shore all night, but we were not gratified with the sight of a single passing train. We saw two or three encampments of railroad men, however, and in one instance passed within ten feet of several sleeping on the bank. We could plainly see their forms stretched out, here and there, and the sentinel, like a bronze figure, perched upon a box, with a musket in his hands. Our boat glided so noiselessly by that the guard himself was not aware of our presence. We now had more fears of a random shot from friends than from foes.

On the following morning we saw a band of Indians on the south shore, but they did not attempt to molest us in any way. About noon that day we reached the town of North Platte, situated at the junction of North and South Platte rivers. This was one of those spontaneous railroad towns, not yet a year old, but it boasted a population of

eight or ten hundred souls. It is built upon a plain several thousand acres in extent and almost as level as a floor. The Union Pacific Railway Company had erected here some shops, and constructed a fine railroad bridge over the North Platte. Within one short year the "desert had blossomed as the rose," and western wilds were turned into thriving settlements, busy with agriculture and commerce; railroad patronage gave the spot prestige. Truly the locomotive has superseded "border whisky" as the harbinger of civilization.

A race between a locomotive and an antelope is an exciting event that very few persons are ever permitted to witness; therefore I will briefly mention one that took place just before we reached the town of North Platte: About five miles above we were overtaken by an excursion train of two coaches returning from the West. As the fiery courser merged into the plain two antelopes were startled from their feeding by the alarming speed and bluster of this frightful object. Believing they were being pursued with malicious intent, they started down the track at a flying pace. This was fine sport for the engineer who spurred his charger

to the utmost, with a view of running them down. We now sprang ashore to witness the result. The game must have had an advantage of at least three hundred yards at the start, but the locomotive gained largely within the first half mile, and before the close of the second it was almost even. Now the engineer and fireman began using their pistols upon the poor, terrified animals, and almost simultaneous with the first shot windows flew up and heads popped out by the dozen. The shooting now became general, and sounded very much like the roar of musketry in a field of engagement. Just as the train was about to pass, one of them fell, riddled, I presume, with bullets; while the other wheeled and ran in the opposite direction like a rabbit overleaped by a dog. The train now stopped, backed up, took on the game and hastened on to town. The whole transaction did not last over three minutes, although it appeared much longer. The race was truly a most blood-stirring and exciting event.

CHAPTER III.

ABOUT noon on the twenty-sixth we reached Fort Cottonwood, where we remained for dinner. The officer in charge gave us all needed supplies, and said he would step down and see us, as the fact of our coming all the way from Denver in canoes greatly excited his curiosity. And sure enough, very much against our notions of propriety, he came with his wife just as we were busily engaged in preparing our repast. Frying bacon, making coffee, mixing and turning "pancakes" etc., under the critical gaze of a real, genuine woman, is more than masculinity can endure under the most favorable circumstances; and of course every article of diet was sadly demoralized. While the husband took each name, and questioned us concerning our adventures, his young wife, to our exceeding great annoyance,

continued the most searching observations of our out-door culinary conduct, and no doubt saw enough absurdity to furnish her amusement during the remainder of her natural life.

Jackson had long been mourning the lack of a sail, as it had been impossible hitherto to obtain a piece of timber suitable for a mast. The large island that stretched its verdure in beautiful array in front of the Fort offered the first inducements within two hundred miles; and immediately after dinner—if it could be called such—poles were secured, and the Rover and Fawn were each supplied with a mast amidships, to which were attached blankets for canvas. Near the middle of the afternoon all was ready, and we "set sail" for Kearney, with a favorable breeze. Some three miles below Cottonwood the Platte again opened out broad and beautiful, for a distance of eight or ten miles, there not being an obstacle to mar the surface between the banks. Now there had been a vast amount of braggadocio kept up as to which boat could do the best sailing; and as this "open sea" gave us a fair field, each party exhausted its nautical skill for the test sail which now began. The canvas being unfurled before a pretty strong

wind, our boats sped through the water at a rapid and most exhilarating rate of speed. The voyage was now becoming exceedingly enjoyable. For the first two or three miles the canoes kept pretty nearly together, but in spite of our most strenuous efforts the Fawn gradually drew ahead, and actually emerged in the next group of islands, near the north shore, about two miles in our advance. This signal defeat was almost unendurable, and the Rover's crew proceeded to vent its ill feeling on a can of turkey.

> "By this the drooping daylight 'gan to fade,
> And yield his room to sad succeeding night,
> Who with her sable mantle 'gan to shade
> The face of earth and ways of living wight."

At that point where our comrades emerged, the Platte, like the miserly farmer, tried to monopolize all the land adjoining, and was almost successful. Here the river was exceedingly wide, filled with islands that were separated by a series of shallow channels, like arteries, often not over ten or twelve feet in width; and the prospect was rendered all the more gloomy by the dense foliage of gigantic cottonwoods and under brush, whose intertwining boughs formed a network never penetrated by the

rays of the sun. This combination formed numbers of beautiful arches, through which our boat gracefully glided in the darkness that was fast encircling all. In such a labyrinth of channels and gloom it was impossible to tell just what one the Fawn had entered, and we began to entertain doubts of seeing our comrades again. And this difficulty, be it remembered, was altogether due to a little wind economically distributed between four rude corners of an army blanket.

Here was solitude sufficient for the most fastidious; but amid it all there was an abundance of animal life. Occasionally a frightened deer would leap across the narrow channel ahead of the boat; yet, however much we coveted venison, we dare not shoot, or even speak above a whisper. Once in a while, as we floated drearily along, an excited bird would stir the leaves into motion over our heads. The darkness resounded with the hum of a thousand insect voices. As he "wheeled his droning flight" in search of prey, the festive mosquito attempted the sociable; and, as a matter of some interest to coming generations, I will say that about ten thousand of these "gay deceivers" did not search entirely in vain.

About midnight we were startled by the sound of voices coming from the depths of the surrounding gloom. Whether it proceeded from friend or foe we could not certainly ascertain, and we clutched our weapons with a more determined grasp. This was a trying moment — that is, it would have been for anybody else. Jackson's teeth chattered as though imprisoned in a refrigerator, and Matthews' face grew so pale that it glowed like a phosphorescent spark; but these gentlemen were not at all frightened, as they repeatedly assured us afterward. And the vast amount of perspiration that oozed from the rest of the crew was due to the peculiarly close condition of the atmosphere undoubtedly. The author did, however, give way to the belief — it was only spasmodic — that he would be lastingly benefited by a self-adjusting scalp for that occasion.

But a crisis was apparently too close at hand for any speculations in scalps. The sounds were growing nearer. As our boat was slowly rounding the point of an island, and before we were scarcely aware of it, we stood face to face — with our friends! They were just getting ready to drag their boat over a sand bar in search of water, and

I have often wondered what would have become of us if we had failed to find any. We had been separated only a few hours, but it seemed almost years. Just how it happened that the Fawn and the Rover selected the same channel, among so many others, is one of those mysterious coincidences that cannot be accounted for upon any rational hypothesis.

While approaching a landing on the following morning the writer met with a rather peculiar accident. Placing one foot on the bow of the boat, and assuming a Christopher Columbus pose, he sprang just at the proper moment to land in the river. His comrades had the kindness to wring him out and dry him over a genial fire of "buffalo chips."

That forenoon we reached Kearney, having traveled the last hundred miles (it is more than a hundred by water) in less than eighteen hours, including stoppages; being the best time made east of Deer Island. We now congratulated ourselves that there was no longer any serious danger to be apprehended from Indians.

As a striking and unmistakable evidence of the sad condition of affairs along the Platte route to

this point, I will say that we saw only two overland trains in traveling a distance of four hundred miles! I could hardly realize this great change, for, during my trips of '65 and '66, the Platte valley was literally lined with emigrants and freighters. Where then could be seen the toiling thousands, hurrying forward to the gold fields, was now truly a desert waste.

The officer in charge at Kearney, who was the most obliging Government official we had met, took our names and made a record of the voyage as an event of unusual importance. Here was a man who could understand some of the many disadvantages under which we had struggled, and was evidently deeply impressed with the perils attending such an expedition at that time. Among other acts of kindness he enriched our larder with an abundant supply of provisions, for which he has our lasting gratitude. This being the last Government post we would have an opportunity to draw on, all were exceedingly careful to slight no privileges, and the consequence was we had almost enough supplies to last the remainder of the journey. From the alacrity with which we accepted these supplies at the various posts, I trust

that the reader will not infer that we did so with a view of defrauding the United States. Not at all; our only object, if we had any aside from that of getting cheap fare, was simply that of testing a government contract on a small scale. Through the great kindness of the commander we were induced to remain over until the following morning.

Some four or five miles below Kearney, on the south side of Grand Island, which extends from a few miles above the Fort sixty miles east, the ground presents the prairie-like appearance of the main land. The shore was occasionally graced with a solitary cottonwood whose giant trunk bade defiance to the farther encroachments of the waves. At this point several small channels merged into one, thus making it about three-fourths of a mile wide. Here we had the satisfaction, on the morning of the twenty-eighth, of again unfurling our sails before a very spirited breeze from the southwest. When the canvas filled, away we went at an alarming rate of speed. We did not get to enjoy this very long, however, for the wind was so strong that we were driven toward the island with such force that it was almost impossible to "tack" sufficient to keep off.

The point where we approached the island there stood a large cottonwood, the boughs of which drooped into the river, and thus formed a beautiful archway between it and the shore. The Fawn, which was about two or three hundred yards ahead, passed under the archway, but owing to a miscalculation on the part of our pilot, who attempted the same feat, the Rover was sent crashing through the branches. While this shock slackened the speed it did not stop the boat, and a glance backward revealed blankets, hats, caps, and other paraphernalia hanging pendant from broken boughs. There was scarcely an article left in our craft, and Jackson, who did not have time to dodge, like the rest of us, was found hanging over one side, clinging on with desperation. We landed at once, threw out an empty brandy bottle as a signal of distress, and motioned our comrades to stop. When they got a view of our sad plight, including hatless heads and punctured scalps, they, severally and conjointly, without any regard whatever for our lacerated feelings, gave way to a fit of boisterous merriment pardonable only in Yankees. The next half hour was spent in swimming out and bringing these luckless articles to shore.

When the several articles were rescued we drifted along the south shore of Grand Island, about two miles, to a beautiful grove, where we went into camp. Here we took dinner and repaired the recent damages sustained by the Rover. At a council held that afternoon, it was decided that we cease night travel altogether, and thereby lay aside another great hazard. The wind being exceedingly strong and adverse that day, we concluded to remain in this encampment until the next morning. The rest of the afternoon was spent in hunting, but with indifferent success.

We had now been on the water over a week, and owing to a peculiarly damp condition of our bedding and surroundings generally, sharp rheumatic pains settled in various portions of our anatomy. But notwithstanding this fact we had an abundance of sport, hunting wild ducks and geese, with which the Platte valley was stocked.

Late on the evening of the twenty-ninth we encamped on the north shore, in the vicinity of Shin's Ferry, climbing a bank several feet above the water. It was a glorious evening, and the declining rays of the setting sun cast a languid shimmer over the broad surface of the Platte, which

rolled on toward the Missouri with a pretentious air highly characteristic of this grand old fraud.

> "It was an evening bright and still
> As ever hushed on wave or bower,
> Smiling from heaven, as if nought ill
> Could happen in so sweet an hour."

During the course of the evening lunch the subject of night travel was again broached. Smith, Bacon and myself fought against it resolutely, but the other five held out in favor of it; the only reason being assigned was to avoid the heat of the sun during the day. This was such a lazy excuse that it reminded us of the story of a starving man who indolently inquired, when corn was offered him, if it was shelled.

As the somber shades of night were settling over all, the luckless trio accepted the situation and set out for the night, though with stifled feelings of indignation. There was no moon—it was a great oversight that this voyage was not made in the moon—and the darkness was simply appalling. I was on the lookout, but could not see ten feet ahead of the boat. When about two miles below the landing I noticed, with some alarm, that our speed was gradually increasing and that there was

visible unusual commotion in the water. I suggested a landing, and the words were scarcely spoken when the bow of the boat dipped and away we went down over the rapids, passing trunks of trees and snags at a frightful rate of speed. The perverse five were now thoroughly frightened, and seized the oars and rowed for shore with might and main. By the time the land, which proved to be an island covered with a dense growth of water willow, was reached, the river had cunningly smoothed the wrinkles in its face and was as calm as ever. This revived that stubborn desire to continue the voyage regardless of consequences, and the only way we could reconcile these "invincibles" was to cut willows and keep up a "smudge" while they slept, the mosquitos having appeared in royal numbers. These were hard conditions, but the Rover and her cargo represented all that Smith and myself possessed, and there was no insurance. The "smudge" was designed to choke the mosquitos, but before morning we found to our sorrow that one of these little pests could absorb as much smoke as six or eight hams. But, if "smudging" was a failure, we succeeded at least in clearing almost an acre of ground before daylight.

We had not proceeded far next morning when our boats struck a "boisterous sea"—waves rolling four or five feet high. Of all the freaks of the Platte this was the most remarkable. By actual measurement the water was not over three feet deep at most, and we could come to no other conclusion than that the base of each wave consisted of quick sand. We had never seen or heard of anything like it. These waves continued for the distance of about a mile, gradually diminishing until there was nothing visible but a gentle ripple. To have drifted into these breakers in the darkness of the previous night would probably have resulted in shipwreck and a failure of the expedition, when success was almost within our grasp. This struck terror into the "invincibles" and nothing more was heard of "night travel" during our voyage down Platte River.

CHAPTER IV.

WITHOUT any other event worthy of note, we drifted out of the quicksands of the Platte into the muddy waters of the "raging" Missouri on the morning of July second, being the twelfth day out from Denver City. Early in the forenoon we reached Plattsmouth, where we received the first mail, including a Denver daily bearing date June 21st, announcing our departure. Here Mathews, our passenger, landed and shipped for the East; and the "forlorn seven" would have done likewise, but for the lack of an appropriation from the citizens of the place. As the Plattsmouthians did not seem to take the necessary interest in our welfare, or even regard our arrival as an event of any importance, we took only one drink apiece there, after which we resumed the journey. When we pushed away from the landing,

however, I was sadly reminded of the mighty volume of misdirected enthusiasm that pushed me westward only two years previous.

A feeling of pride now stirred within us when we found ourselves on the bosom of the mighty, treacherous, fickle Missouri. It seemed as if we had emerged from the silent recesses of an Indian trial, into a great public highway, where a nation's commerce is wont to travel. In the first we feared running into danger; in the second we feared danger would run into us. Instead of the shallow Platte we now had to deal with a current capable of swallowing steamboats and sections of land. Now there was no effort put forth to avoid land, but there was a strong desire to cling to it, without any apprehensions of having to get out, in the middle of the night, to drag the boats over sand bars, the "Big Muddy" being a very deep stream. Scientists say that the length of legs in water fowl is due to the bird holding its body up to keep its feathers dry while wading. This thought, duly considered in connection with the vast amount of wading we did on the Platte, may account for the extreme length of legs represented by our party.

The melting snows of the Northwest had reached the Missouri and swelled its volume until the banks could hardly contain its mighty current of muddy water and driftwood. Floating lazily along with trunks of trees, broken branches, etc., were to be seen occasional "Mackinaw" boats, forty or fifty feet in length, and containing fifteen or twenty men. These vessels were nothing more than large row-boats with one deck, covered with a tarpaulin as a protection against the elements. They were built at different points away up on the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, for the accommodation of miners and other adventurers who could not or would not pay steamboat passage to Omaha and other points above or below. Many of them had traveled a distance of two thousand miles and looked considerably weather-worn. These "Mackinaw" gentlemen looked upon the Fawn and Rover with some surprise at first, but soon regarded them with a supercilious air. The Rover was the "Great Eastern" of the Platte, but when we reached the Missouri comparisons became odious.

About seven o'clock that evening we landed under the abrupt bluff that overhangs the river at Nebraska City. Here a portion of the party

expected to remain over night, but the adverse element again brought up the detested subject of night travel. After an animated discussion the trio again yielded to avoid a dissolution, but with the express understanding that it would be the last night—"positively the last night." At this juncture Smith suggested that in view of their probable final destination it were far better for them to get accustomed to the heat of the sun.

"The shades of night were falling fast," etc., as we again launched forth. As the boats floated along under the ominous shadows of those precipitous bluffs, a feeling of alarm gradually took possession of me. Somehow I could not divest myself of the thought that we were needlessly assuming some grave possibilities.

> "Who can express the horror of that night,
> When darkness lent his robes to monster fear;
> And heav'n's black mantle, banishing the light,
> Made every thing in ugly form appear?"

At eleven o'clock Smith relieved me on the watch, and with nerves all unstrung I lay down and tried to sleep. There was no moon, but all at once the shadows beamed with a light hardly transcended by the sun at meridian—a light shone

'round about us quite as dazzling, perhaps, as that which blinded Saul of Tarsus near two thousand years ago. It revealed all objects on land and water. A hissing noise like that of a sky-rocket caused us to look up. Sublime spectacle! A large meteor was moving grandly through space, starting at a point east of the zenith, and soon sinking below the horizon to startle humanity with its splendors in some other part of the world. Although it was soon out of sight, yet it left a flame of burning light athwart the "welkin dome" that did not entirely fade away for the space of eight or ten minutes. Then again it became as dark as Erebus. The middle of the Missouri was a good spot for observation; and I felt thankful, for the time being, that I was there. This meteor, which fell on the night of the second of July, was visible at many points in the United States, and the writer had the satisfaction of seeing several glowing descriptions of it a few days later in the papers.

After the meteor had been thoroughly discussed I attempted to sleep. I had sweltered in a kind of comatose condition for some time, when I heard Smith say "There comes a steamboat!" I rose

right up like one waking from a delirious dream. The rapid splash of the wheels could be heard distinctly. Pretty soon the danger signals hove in view, and glared upon us with a demoniacal light. Here was a new dilemma. It was evident that a collision with this monster would be rather disastrous to us; and while we knew that our boats were right in the channel, yet it was so dark that no one could tell the direction of the current. Land could be seen at every point of the compass, and it was simply impossible to tell which way to steer to avoid the steamer. Even if we should succeed in passing her, our boats would likely be swallowed by the waves. In this dire necessity we selected a clump of trees to the left and rowed for dear life. It proved to be an island skirted with willows, to which we clung with desperation. This flimsy position was barely attained when the object of our fright toiled by within fifteen or twenty feet of us, no one on board being aware of our presence. Then with a firm grasp on the willows we participated in a spirited *tete-a-tete* over waves that rolled five or six feet high.

Once out upon the foaming, seething current I attempted sleep, but it was impossible; the sur-

roundings had so wrought upon my feelings that I was kept in a state of nervous wakefulness. In truth it was all we could do to avoid snags, which were grinning like demons on every side. If I were to live a thousand years I could not forget that night's adventure on the "Big Muddy." It was a frightful experience, and one that caused me to regard the Missouri River pilot with a feeling of veneration. How little the traveler by packet realizes how much of safety and comfort is due to his untiring watchfulness.

A good portion of the next day was spent on the Nebraska shore, near the hut of a gray-headed Kentuckian who had left his native state during the war. His needs were few and his wishes still less. Here, in the shade of some gigantic cottonwoods, he was content to spend his days in indolent ease. A piece of corn bread, a bowl of milk, and a "hunk" of "dog leg" tobacco, were all that was necessary to make his honest old countenance beam with gratitude. The insatiable ambition that keeps the great mass of humanity in ceaseless turmoil and strife was not to be found in his make-up, for all of which I believe he was truly thankful. At this time I was in an excellent condition to appreciate his philosophy.

That evening we dropped down to Brownsville, where we passed the "glorious Fourth." Whisky was not nearly so high here as at Denver and it did not cost so much to enthuse. Neither did it require so many drinks to conciliate the American eagle. Here we put up at a hotel near the river; but my nerves had been under such a strain for the past week or so that I could not rest, and occasionally found myself sitting upright in bed, giving orders like an old river captain, much to the annoyance of my comrade, who appeared to be taking lessons in snoring.

After remaining in Brownsville a few days the Massachusetts "boys" disposed of their boat and embarked for St. Joseph per steam packet. The same day Smith, Jackson and myself sailed for the same city in the Rover.

The first night out from Brownsville we encamped on the western shore about sunset. Near two hundred yards back we saw a rickety old cabin surrounded with trees and plum bushes. In a very brief space of time we were confronted with an old Indian half-breed, and a multitudinous array of little half-breeds of almost every age and condition. Now a half-breed Indian is simply a mixture of the

white and red races in the proportion of about 'alf and 'alf, the combination forming a very poor commentary on the virtues and general appearance of both. Next to the Mexican "greaser" he is the filthiest and laziest human specimen extant. He is a cross between a fading chivalry and a Missouri loafer; and while he is *half-breed* he is by no means *half bred.* He is not vicious, his good qualities being negative; and he seems to have inherited from each progenitor an alarming predisposition to "multiply and replenish the earth." We attempted to number the children belonging to this cabin, but darkness interrupted the count.

These visitors had not been in our camp long when the good-natured sire told us that he was going out that night to capture a "bee tree," and gave us an invitation to accompany him.

When the moon was "well up," the old man and three of his boys led the way into the forest followed by Smith and myself, who brought up the rear with a half dozen dogs. For the first mile or more the trail led through marshy bottom land covered with large trees and underbrush, through which the moon's pale rays occasionally penetrated. When the bluffs were reached our cicerone plunged

into tortuous ravines for some distance, and finally we began to wonder if we were not victims of misplaced confidence. But that was a sight—this rugged old Indian, with an axe swung carelessly over his shoulder groping his way through thickets, ravines, and over hills, his swarthy countenance now and then lit up by a straggling moonbeam, with never a word escaping his lips—I shall never forget. It was a scene worthy of a painter's brush.

On reaching the top of a sharp ridge our leader signified that we had at last found the object of search, by pointing out a large white oak tree. This brought a sigh of relief, and on the part of the writer no little wonder at the certainty with which he singled out that identical tree among so many others which it closely resembled, and that too, in the night. After a little rest the axes were plied to the tree with vigor. Now straggling remnants of his numerous progeny began to appear. Then came his squaw, astride of a mule, with three small children. The mule appeared to be tired of life. At this juncture the oak came down with a crash, and being cut open, honey was found in abundance and of excellent quality. Now that most interesting feature of removing the deli-

cate morsels began, and was kept up without any very serious interruption.

While this feast was in progress enraged bees crawled hither and thither seeking an opportunity for revenge. Recognizing their true enemies, and duly appreciating a scantiness of wardrobe, they made half-breeds a specialty, much to *our* delight. When a squad of these little pests found a base for operations, there was some very animated movements, now and then accompanied with some piercing shrieks. But the sire — they took a deep interest in the sire. After many severe trials an old veteran succeeded in getting beneath his shirt. The "old man" dropped everything and began a series of hops, groans, and grimaces that would have brought tears to the eyes of a hired mourner. These movements brought undue pressure on the shirt, and gave a fresh impetus at the point of contact underneath. Seeing her liege lord nearly frantic, his wife seized the garment, pulled it over his head, and brushed the invader away. As it was entirely a family matter, Smith and myself tried to avoid showing any feeling over the scene, but the next day there was quite a healthy smile perceptible at certain points along the river below. When the

treasure was gathered and secured we made our way back, reaching camp sometime after midnight.

The second day after we arrived at St. Joseph, whence we had come without any special object. Here we met Bacon and his comrades, who were sadly afflicted with the "cramps," financially speaking. We remained over Sunday.

This was the nearest point home, but alas! "so near and yet so far!" I now saw plainly the folly of rambling, and was so discouraged that I did not care to go anywhere in particular. I had become so accustomed to the high wages and fabulous expectations of mining life that I had lost all regard for ordinary pursuits, and was utterly incapacitated for any calling that required hard licks and close-fisted perseverance. My pride spurned me, too, a little, and I could not think of going home just yet. No, I had not seen enough of the West; neither had Smith. So early one morning we bade the "boys" a farewell and started for Leavenworth in the Rover. I have not seen or heard of those poor fellows since, and have often wondered, with some solicitude, what finally became of them, moneyless and discouraged as they were. Query: Did they join the Grand Army of Tramps?

The trip from St. Joseph to Leavenworth was not marked with any event of importance. That evening the beautiful limestone buildings of the Fort broke upon our astonished gaze. Just as the sun was sinking behind that boundless expanse of hill and prairie, back of the city, we landed at the wharf and lashed the Rover to the shore for the last time. This act, the reader may be assured, was attended with a violent sigh of relief and a bundle of "fond regrets." And thus ended this tedious, novel, dangerous and highly interesting voyage of over one thousand miles through some of the wildest and most monotonous scenery in the United States.

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